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ORG: SALT

SALT II: The Long Vigil

Minor differences keep delaying a U.S.-Soviet arms pact

It is one of the longest countdowns in diplomatic memory—and one of the most frustrating. For months the end of the U.S.-Soviet arms talks has seemed so imminent that officials and reporters have mounted a kind of SALT vigil. But a settlement keeps turning out to be just beyond reach. No sooner have negotiators resolved what earlier had been described as the last few issues than new points of dispute pop up.

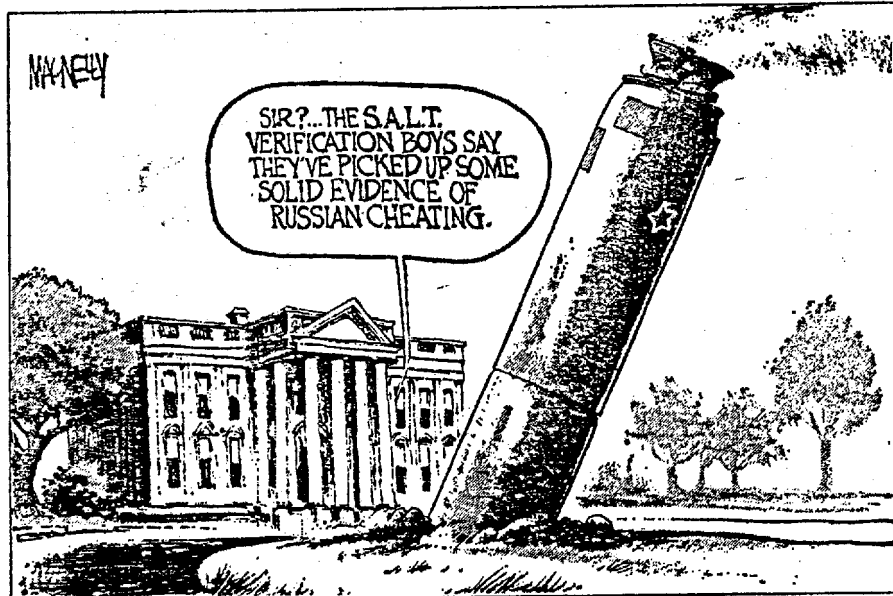
Last week was typical. As it began, there were encouraging signs that the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. might approve a SALT II draft treaty within a few days. The White House had scheduled a background briefing for the press, and it was known that Jimmy Carter was planning to make SALT the centerpiece of his speech

ten for the Soviet monster SS-18. But last December the U.S. detected the Soviets testing an SS-18 in a way that suggested that the missile might soon have the capacity to carry twelve warheads. Since the MIRV freeze is an important selling point in the upcoming battle for SALT II ratification, the Carter Administration wants specific language banning any Soviet test that could allow more than ten warheads to be fired.

On the other side, the Soviets brought up an old complaint about America's ICBMs. Under SALT II, each side will be allowed a maximum of 820 land-based, MIRVed rockets, and the two countries must agree in advance which are to be counted as MIRVs. From time to time the Soviets have hinted darkly that they were

The President alluded to the danger of leaks in his Manhattan speech. Noting that the ratification process will require sharing "with the Congress some of our most sensitive defense and intelligence secrets," he stressed that congressional leaders "must insure that these secrets will be guarded so that the debate itself will not undermine our own security." Later in the week Secretary Vance said on Capitol Hill that "the leaking of classified information may well prejudice our negotiating positions." He suggested that "one of the ways to stop these leaks is to reduce the number of people who are privy to this information."

The SALT debate will intensify when the countdown ends and a treaty draft is finally produced. The current batch of issues blocking a pact, which could drag on indefinitely, could also be resolved in about ten minutes of Vance-Dobrynin negotiations if both the White House and the Kremlin choose to make that happen. So it is possible—once again—that SALT II could be concluded this week, or...



at the American Newspaper Publishers Association conference in Manhattan. There was even some speculation that he would use this forum to announce the conclusion of the talks.

The Cabinet-level Special Coordination Committee, which sets tactics for the arms talks, met to give Secretary of State Cyrus Vance instructions for what might have turned out to be his final SALT II bargaining round with Soviet Ambassador Anatoli Dobrynin. But after conferring Wednesday, bringing to eight their meetings in April alone, the two senior diplomats were still unable to tie up the treaty's ever unraveling ends. As usual, each of last week's negotiating sessions yielded some progress, but not enough.

What stymied the talks this time were again relatively minor issues. Both sides, for example, had previously agreed that the number of MIRVs (multiple warheads) on each type of intercontinental ballistic missile would be frozen at the quantity already tested. That meant a maximum of

having difficulty distinguishing the 450 U.S. single-warhead Minuteman IIs from the 550 MIRVed Minuteman IIIs. For months they were silent on the issue, but they recently brought it up again, probably for bargaining leverage on other issues. What especially irritated the U.S. negotiators was that Moscow had previously implied that it had adequate means of determining the difference between the silos containing Minuteman IIs and Minuteman IIIs.

At the Pentagon and the CIA, there is concern that the SALT ratification battle will be an intelligence bonanza for the Kremlin. Reflecting the views of Defense Secretary Harold Brown, a Pentagon official fretted: "In support of a treaty's point, a piece of information will leak out; then another one will come out in rebuttal." The official fears, in fact, that "some things have already slipped out" in the controversy over U.S. ability to verify Soviet compliance with SALT's terms.